

# MOROCCO 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

According to the constitution, Islam is the religion of the state, and the state guarantees freedom of thought, expression, and assembly. The constitution also says the state guarantees everyone the freedom to “practice their religious affairs.” The constitution states the King holds the title “Commander of the Faithful” and that he is the protector of Islam and the guarantor of the freedom “to practice their religious affairs” in the country. The constitution prohibits political parties founded on religion as well as political parties, parliamentarians, and constitutional amendments from denigrating or infringing on Islam. The law penalizes the use of enticements to convert a Muslim to another religion and prohibits criticism of Islam. It criminalizes acts and speech “undermining the Islamic religion.”

Although the law allows registration of religious groups as associations, some minority religious groups reported the government delayed or rejected their registration requests. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) continued to guide and monitor the content of sermons in mosques, Islamic religious education, and the dissemination of Islamic religious material by broadcast media, actions it said were intended to combat violent extremism. The government restricted the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials as well as Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki school of Sunni Islam.

In August, the Oued-Zem Court of First Instance (trial court) sentenced blogger Fatima Karim to two years in prison and fined her 50,000 dirhams (\$4,800) for insulting Islam. Police arrested her after she posted commentary on social media in which she reportedly made satirical comments about Quranic verses. On April 27, the press reported that the General Directorate of National Security (DGSN) arrested approximately 80 persons in a café in Casablanca for publicly eating during Ramadan; the government said that 55 persons had been arrested. Authorities released those detained later that evening. According to the government, 61 persons were criminally charged or convicted for engaging in prohibited acts during the month of Ramadan.

Representatives of minority religious groups said they practiced their faiths discreetly principally out of fear of societal harassment, including ostracism by converts' families, social ridicule, employment discrimination, and potential violence against them by "extremists." According to press, a group of Marrakech middle-school students were filmed breaking the Ramadan fast during daylight hours, sparking criticism on the internet.

The U.S. Ambassador, Chargé d'Affaires (Chargé) and other embassy and consulate general officials met with government officials, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the MEIA, to discuss religious freedom and tolerance, including the rights of minority communities. In November, the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited the country, where she met Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, Minister of Endowments and Islamic Affairs Ahmed al-Toufiq, and other government leaders, and engaged with the Jewish community and civil society on issues of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. In regular meetings and discussions with members of religious minority and majority communities throughout the country, embassy and consulate general representatives highlighted the importance of the protection of religious minorities and interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador, Chargé, Consul General, and other embassy officials regularly met with members of the Jewish community in Rabat and Casablanca, as well as with Jewish leaders in other cities, including Marrakesh and Tangier.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 36.7 million (midyear 2022). More than 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, and less than 0.1 percent of the population is Shia Muslim. Groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Christians, Jews, and Baha'is.

According to Jewish community leaders, there are an estimated 3,500 Jews in the country, approximately 2,500 of whom reside in Casablanca. Some Christian community leaders estimate there are between 1,500 and 12,000 Christian citizens distributed throughout the country; however, the Moroccan Association of Human Rights estimates there are 25,000 Christian citizens. According to some print and electronic media outlets, the number of Christian citizens could exceed 30,000, although due to the absence of statistical data from official and research

centers and the fact that some Christians practice in private, it is difficult to reach an accurate estimate.

Foreign-resident Christian leaders estimate there are at least 30,000 Roman Catholic and approximately 10,000 Protestant noncitizens, many of whom are recent migrants from sub-Saharan Africa or lifelong residents whose families have resided and worked in the country for generations but do not hold citizenship. There are small, foreign-resident Anglican communities in Rabat, Casablanca, and Tangier. There are an estimated 3,000 foreign residents who identify as Russian and Greek Orthodox, including a small Russian Orthodox community in Rabat and a small Greek Orthodox community in Casablanca. Most foreign-resident Christians live in the Casablanca, Marrakesh, Tangier, and Rabat urban areas, but small numbers are present throughout the country, including many who are migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.

Shia Muslim leaders estimate there are several thousand Shia citizens, with the largest proportion in the north. In addition, there are an estimated 1,000 to 2,000 foreign-resident Shia from Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, and Iraq. Leaders of the Ahmadi Muslim community estimate their numbers at 750. Leaders of the Baha'i Faith community estimate there are 350 to 400 members throughout the country.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

According to the constitution, the country is a "sovereign Muslim state" and Islam is the religion of the state. The constitution guarantees freedom of thought, expression, and assembly, and the state guarantees every individual the freedom to practice their religion. The constitution states the King holds the title "Commander of the Faithful" and that he is the protector of Islam and the guarantor of the freedom to practice religious affairs in the country. The constitution prohibits the enactment of laws or constitutional amendments infringing upon its provisions relating to Islam, and it also recognizes the Jewish community as an integral component of society. According to the constitution, political parties may not be founded on religion and may not denigrate or infringe on Islam. A political party may not legally challenge Islam as the state religion.

Religions other than Islam and Judaism are not recognized by the constitution or laws. The law prohibits basing a party on a religious, ethnic, or regional identity.

The constitution and the law governing media prohibit any individual, including members of parliament, who are normally immune from arrest while engaging in their parliamentary duties, from criticizing Islam on public platforms, such as print or online media, or in public speeches. Such expressions are punishable by imprisonment of up to two years, a fine of up to 200,000 dirhams (\$19,100), or both. Punishment may be increased to five years' imprisonment or a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 dirhams (\$4,800 to \$48,000), or both, if the acts "are committed either by speech, scream, or threat made in public places or public meetings, or by poster publicly exhibited by sale, distribution, or any other means used for publicity, including online, paper, and audiovisual forms." Other provisions of the law state that online speech offenses related to Islam can carry prison sentences of two to six years.

The law penalizes anyone who "employs enticements to undermine the faith" or converts a Muslim to another faith by exploiting a weakness or need for assistance, or through the use of educational, health, or other institutions; it provides punishments of six months to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$19 to \$48). The same penalties apply to anyone who intentionally interferes with religious rites or celebrations where this causes disturbances or affects the dignity of such religious acts. It also provides the right to a court trial for anyone accused of such an offense. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the law. The law permits the government to summarily expel any noncitizen resident it determines to be "a threat to public order," and the government has used this clause to expel foreigners suspected of proselytizing.

By law, impeding or preventing one or more persons from worshipping or from attending worship services of any religion is punishable by six months to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$19 to \$48). The penal code states any person known to be Muslim who breaks the fast in public during the month of Ramadan without an exception granted by religious authorities is liable to punishment of six months in prison and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams. Owners have discretion to keep their restaurants open during Ramadan.

The labor code prohibits discrimination against persons in employment and occupation based on race, religion, national origin, color, sex, ethnicity, or disability, including physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disability.

The penal code punishes anyone who “undermines the Islamic religion” with six months to two years in prison. The penalty is increased to five years if the offense is committed in public, including by electronic means.

The High Authority for Audiovisual Communications established by the constitution requires all eight public television stations to dedicate 5 percent of their airtime to Islamic religious content and to broadcast the Islamic call to prayer five times daily.

Sunni Muslims and Jews are the only religious groups recognized in the constitution as native to the country. A separate set of laws and special courts govern personal status matters for Jews, including functions such as marriage, inheritance, and other personal status matters. Rabbinical authorities, who are also court officials, administer Jewish family courts. Muslim judges trained in the country’s Maliki Sunni interpretation of sharia administer the courts for personal status matters for all other religious groups. According to the law, a Muslim man may marry a Muslim, Christian, or Jewish woman; a Muslim woman may not marry a man of another religion unless he converts to Islam. Non-Muslims must formally convert to Islam and be permanent residents before they can become guardians of abandoned or orphaned children. Guardianship entails the caretaking of a child, which may last until the child reaches 18, but it does not allow changing the child’s name or inheritance rights and requires maintaining the child’s birth religion, according to orphanage directors.

Many foreign-resident Christian churches (churches run by and attended by foreign residents only) are registered as associations. The Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican churches maintain different forms of official status. The Russian Orthodox and Anglican Churches are registered as branches of international associations through the embassies of Russia and the United Kingdom, respectively. Protestant and Catholic churches, whose existence as foreign-resident churches predates the country’s independence in 1956, as well as the Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches,

maintain a special status recognized by the government, which allows them to preserve houses of worship and assign foreign clergy.

Legal provisions outlined in the general tax code provide tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the religious activities of recognized religious groups (Sunni Muslims and Jews) and religious groups registered as associations (some foreign-resident Christian churches). The law does not require religious groups to register to worship privately, but a nonrecognized religious group must register as an association to conduct business on behalf of the group (e.g., open and hold bank accounts, rent property, acquire land and building grants, and have access to customs exemptions for imports necessary for religious activities) or to hold public gatherings. Associations must register with local Ministry of Interior officials in the jurisdiction of the association's headquarters. An individual representative of a religious group neither recognized nor registered as an association may be held liable for any of the group's public gatherings, transactions, bank accounts, property rentals, or petitions to the government. The registration application must contain the name and purpose of the association; the name, nationality, age, profession, and residential address of each founder; and the address of the association's headquarters. The constitution provides civil society associations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) the right to organize themselves and exercise their activities freely within the scope of the constitution. The law on associations prohibits organizations that pursue activities the government regards as "illegal, contrary to good morals, or aimed at undermining the Islamic religion, the integrity of the national territory, or the monarchical regime, or which call for discrimination."

The law does not allow Moroccan Christians to be buried in Christian cemeteries or to hold Christian names.

By law, all publicly and privately funded national educational institutions must teach Sunni Islam in accordance with the teachings and traditions of the Maliki-Ashari school of Islamic jurisprudence, with the exception of private Jewish schools, which may teach Judaism without including Islamic education. Foreign-run schools have the choice of including or omitting Islamic religious instruction within the school's curriculum.

According to the constitution, only the High Council of Ulema, a group headed and appointed by the King with representatives from all regions of the country, is authorized to issue fatwas, which become legally binding only through the King's endorsement in a royal decree and a subsequent confirmation by parliamentary legislation. Such fatwas are considered binding only for Maliki Sunni Muslims. If the King or parliament declines to ratify a decision of the council, the decision remains nonbinding and unenforced.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

In August, the Oued-Zem Court of First Instance sentenced blogger Fatima Karim to two years in prison and fined her 50,000 dirhams (\$4,800) for insulting Islam. The police arrested her on July 15 after she posted commentary on Facebook in which, according to Amnesty International, she made satirical comments about Quranic verses that the authorities deemed insulting to Islam. The government has held her in solitary confinement since her arrest. Her brother told the press that Karim intended to appeal the verdict.

According to the government, 61 persons were criminally charged or convicted for engaging in prohibited acts during the month of Ramadan.

On April 27, press reported that the DGSN arrested approximately 80 persons in a café in Casablanca for publicly eating during Ramadan. The government, however, said authorities arrested 55 persons. According to online media, several of those arrested were teenagers from nearby international schools, as well as café staff. Following the arrest, the public prosecutor's office of Casablanca ordered the immediate release of those with chronic illnesses not performing the fast. The DGSN released the remaining individuals without charges after completing an investigation later that evening. When human rights activists criticized the arrests, a police spokesman said those arrested were treated "with dignity and respect," and that "the exercising of one's personal freedoms [publicly breaking the fast] should never be at the expense of others' freedoms [to observe the fast]."

In April, the DGSN carried out a similar operation at the Star Box cafe in Casablanca, resulting in the arrest of six individuals for breaking the Ramadan fast. Police said they conducted the operation to enforce laws prohibiting Muslims from publicly breaking the fast. The public prosecutor's office ordered the release of the individuals in question with no subsequent prosecution.

Press outlets reported two other arrests of individuals for publicly breaking the Ramadan fast. On April 15, police arrested a young man in al-Hoceima. The status of his case was unknown. Police arrested another man in Marrakech, whom a court later gave a two-month suspended sentence and a fine of 200 dirhams (\$19) on April 29.

Authorities continued to deny Christian organizations that are composed of citizens the right to Christian or civil marriage and funeral services or the right to establish new churches. The government denied official recognition to NGOs that it considered to be advocating against Islam as the state religion.

The government continued to allow the operation of 44 registered, foreign-resident Christian churches. Some foreign pastors reported that Christian citizens generally did not attend their services out of fear of incurring government harassment. Foreign residents and visitors attended religious services without restriction at those churches.

The Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), a Sunni Islamist social movement that rejects the King's spiritual authority, remained banned but was still active. The government continued to monitor the JCO's activities, and it remained the largest social movement of its kind in the country, despite being unregistered. The JCO continued to release press statements, hold conferences, manage internet sites, and participate in political demonstrations. According to media outlets, there were instances in which the government prevented the organization from meeting and restricted public distribution of the JCO's published materials.

A number of religious groups reported occasionally informing authorities of planned large gatherings, for which authorities at times assisted with security measures.



According to religious leaders and legal scholars, the government's refusal to allow Shia Muslim groups to register as associations continued to prevent the groups from gathering legally for public religious observations. There were no known Shia mosques or *husseiniyas* (Shia prayer halls) in the country. According to Shia community members, they were able to pray in Sunni mosques, but they risked criticism from other worshippers for their religious practices.

The Christian NGO Open Doors stated in its 2022 *World Watch List* that the penal code, which criminalizes "shaking the faith" of a Muslim, put many Christians who talked to others about their faith at risk of criminal prosecution and arrest. The NGO also stated that while the penal code provision "only punish[ed] proselytization, converts to Christianity [could] be punished in other ways, such as loss of inheritance rights and custody of their children." It also reported that "this year, several believers were forced to leave the country."

A 2017 ban on the import, production, and sale of the burqa remained in effect. The MOI publicly cited security concerns as justification for the ban, as the garment could conceal the identity of the wearer. The ban did not prevent individuals from wearing burqas or making them at home for individual use. Authorities prohibited news anchors on national television and police and army personnel in uniform from wearing a hijab or burqa.

The MEIA's Mohamed VI Institute remained the principal government institution responsible for shaping the country's religious life and promoting its interpretation of Sunni Islam. The Mohammed VI Institute was responsible for the spiritual training of *morchidines* (imams) and women religious leaders called *morchidates* (similar to imams, except they do not lead communal prayers). The institute has operated since 2014 and has provided training to more than 6,000 religious officials, including approximately 4,200 foreigners. Non-Moroccan religious students came predominantly from sub-Saharan Africa. The training sessions fulfilled the requirement for Moroccan religious leaders to acquire a certificate issued by the High Council of Ulema to operate in the country.

The MEIA developed elementary school programs advocating moderation, coexistence, and tolerance in accordance with the Sunni Maliki school of jurisprudence followed by the country.

The Rabita Mohammadia des Oulema (Mohammadia League of Scholars, often referred to as the Rabita) continued its program, begun in 2021, dedicated to training Islamic social media influencers. At year's end, 160 persons had participated in the league's program. The program's three-day training sessions focused on countering online extremist messaging and ideology. Since its establishment in 2006, the Rabita has served as the government's lead institution in countering violent extremism and promoting interfaith dialogue.

The government required Muslim religious leaders who worked in the country to abide by the guidelines outlined in the MEIA-issued *Guide of the Imam, Khatib, and the Preacher*. The MEIA continued to guide and monitor the content of sermons in mosques, Islamic religious education, and the dissemination of Islamic religious material by broadcast media, actions it said were intended to combat violent extremism.

The MEIA continued to monitor Quranic schools to prevent what the ministry considered inflammatory or extremist rhetoric and to ensure teachings followed approved doctrine.

The government required mosques to close to the public shortly after daily prayer times to prevent use of the premises for what it termed "unauthorized activity," including gatherings authorities believed could promote extremism. MOI and MEIA authorization continued to be required for the renovation or construction of churches, synagogues, and mosques, including those using private funds.

The government continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials as well as some Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki school of Sunni Islam. Despite restrictions on the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, the government permitted the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish. A limited number of Arabic translations of the Bible were available for sale in a few bookshops for use in higher education courses.

On July 14, the King announced the establishment of three organizations under the authority of the Council of Ministers. The first, the National Council of the Moroccan Jewish Community, "will be responsible for managing the affairs of the community and safeguarding the cultural and religious heritage and influence of Judaism in Morocco". Regional committees of the council "will be responsible for

managing the day-to-day issues and affairs of the community's members.” The second, the Committee of Moroccan Jews Living Abroad, “will strengthen the ties of Moroccan Jews living abroad to Morocco, enhance their cultural and religious influence, and mobilize them to defend the interests of the kingdom.” The final organization, the Foundation of Moroccan Judaism, “will promote and protect Jewish-Moroccan heritage, safeguarding its traditions and preserving its unique character.”

In November, the Mohammed VI Polytechnic University in Rabat opened the first university synagogue in the Arab world next to the university’s new mosque. According to a media report, the synagogue was expected to provide religious services for the Jewish community on campus and teach Muslim students about Judaism.

Government policy prohibits the sale of all books, videotapes, and DVDs it considered religiously extremist. In June, press reported that the Supreme Scientific Council strongly condemned the film, *The Lady of Heaven*, which depicted the life of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and which was written by a Shia cleric in the United Kingdom. The council stated that the film “expressed an extreme Shiite opinion on the history of Islam,” sought “to deepen the dispute between Muslims,” and was “a falsification of Muslim history.”

The government continued drafting an educational charter mandating that traditional education be based on “values” and “respect for religious and legal studies.” The Ministry of Education continued an ongoing review of the religion curriculum used in primary and secondary education and continued to make reforms based on universal values of liberty, empathy, solidarity, and honesty. Since the review began in 2016, 29 textbooks have been rewritten. Additional modifications to textbooks continued during the year.

Jewish and Christian citizens continued to say that elementary and high-school curricula did not include mention of the historical legacy and current presence of their groups in the country. The Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education, and Scientific Research began to implement changes to the public-school curriculum, announced in 2021, to include Jewish heritage and history in both Arabic and French, starting in the fourth year of primary

school. The government continued to fund the study of Jewish culture and heritage at state-run universities.

The government continued to disseminate information about Islam and Judaism over dedicated state-funded television and radio channels. Television channel Assadissa (Six) programming was strictly religious, consisting primarily of Quran and *hadith* (sayings or customs of Muhammad and his companions) readings and explanations highlighting the government's interpretation of Islam.

According to observers, the government permitted social and charitable activities consistent with Sunni Islam. For example, the Unity and Reform Movement, the country's largest registered Islamic social organization, continued its close relationship with the Party of Justice and Development, which Human Rights Watch has described as an Islamist group viewed by the government as a political adversary, and continued to operate without restriction, according to media reports.

The monarchy continued to support the restoration of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries throughout the country, efforts it stated were necessary to preserve the country's religious and cultural heritage and to serve as a symbol of tolerance.

The Prison Administration authorized religious observances and services provided by religious leaders for all prisoners, including religious minorities.

On May 11-12, the government-sponsored National Council of Human Rights hosted an international conference of more than 100 legislators, diplomats, former officials, and other experts to "build global rules to ban all political uses of religion."

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Representatives of minority religious groups said fear of societal harassment, including ostracism by converts' families, social ridicule, employment discrimination, and potential violence against them by "extremists" were the main reasons for them to practice their faiths privately and away from public view.

According to the press, a group of Marrakech middle-school students were filmed breaking the Ramadan fast during daylight hours, provoking online criticism. The school that the students were believed to attend denied any involvement in the incident, which it said had occurred “several hundred meters” from its facilities.

Shia sources reported they observed Ashura in private to avoid societal harassment. Shia Muslims said that many avoided disclosing their religious affiliation in areas where their numbers were smaller. Public Ashura processions are allowed for Sunni Muslims but are forbidden for Shia Muslims.

There were reports from media outlets, activists, community leaders, and Christian converts that Christian citizens faced social pressure from Muslim family and friends to convert to Islam or renounce their Christian faith. Some young Christian converts who still lived with their Muslim families reportedly did not reveal their faith because they believed they might be expelled from their homes unless they renounced Christianity.

Jewish citizens continued to state that they lived and attended services at synagogues in safety. They said they were able to visit religious sites regularly and to hold annual commemorations and that increased tourist visitation to Jewish heritage sites, facilitated by the government, meant more resources to revitalize Jewish places of worship.

Members of the Baha’i Faith said they were open about their faith with family, friends, and neighbors.

Muslim citizen children and youths continued to study at private Christian and Jewish elementary and high schools, reportedly because these schools maintained a reputation for offering a high-quality education. According to school administrators, Muslim students constituted a significant portion of the students enrolled at Jewish schools in Casablanca.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Ambassador, Chargé, and other embassy and consulate general officials met with government officials, including from the MFA, MOI and MEIA, to promote religious freedom and tolerance, including the rights of minority communities.

In November, the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited the country and met Foreign Minister Bourita, Minister of Endowments and Islamic Affairs al-Toufiq, and other ministers. During her visit, she also engaged with government leaders, members of the Jewish community, and civil society on issues of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

In regular meetings and discussions with members of religious communities throughout the country, embassy and consulate general representatives highlighted the importance of protection of religious minorities and interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador, Chargé, and Consul General regularly met with members of the Jewish community in Rabat and Casablanca, as well as with Jewish leaders in other cities, including Marrakesh and Tangier.

On December 19, the Ambassador participated in a Hanukkah celebration with members of the international and Moroccan Jewish community that included Royal Counselor Andre Azoulay, who gave an interview noting how the celebration embodied the spirit of tolerance and coexistence in the country. In speaking with press after the event, the Ambassador underscored the degree of religious acceptance in the country and reiterated U.S. government support for religious diversity and freedom.

In March, the Consul General hosted a lunch for Casablanca's Christian leaders to discuss religious tolerance and issues of importance to the Christian community.

On April 24, the Chargé hosted an iftar for more than two dozen young persons who were alumni of U.S. government exchange programs.

On April 28, the Chargé and Consul General hosted an iftar with representatives from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities at the Jewish Community Center in Casablanca. The Consul General worked with Royal Counselor Azoulay to plan the event and the Chargé delivered remarks emphasizing the country's embrace of its religious diversity.

The U.S. government continued its cooperative agreement with the Mimouna Association, a Moroccan-based NGO, to combat antisemitism, including anti-Zionism, the delegitimization of Israel, and other forms of intolerance and hatred, including hatred against Islam.

The embassy continued to provide funding for “Rebuilding Our Homes,” a program established in 2021 in partnership with the American Sephardi Federation and the Mimouna Association. The project’s main goal is to revive and preserve Jewish heritage contained within the Mellahs (the historic Jewish quarters) of Fez, Essaouira, and Rabat.

The embassy used social media to highlight religious holidays as a way to promote religious freedom and tolerance.